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How Christ Was Condemned: The Trial of Jesus

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counting the highlights of his forty-five year fight for press freedom, Baillie—in retirement—says that the fight goes on and his book is “To be continued”.

ANTONIO G. MANUUD

HOW CHRIST WAS CONDEMNED

THE TRIAL OF JESUS; the Jewish and Roman proceedings against Jesus Christ described and assessed from the oldest accounts. By Josef Blinzler; translated from the second revised and enlarged German edition by Isabel and Florence McHugh. Westminster, Maryland: 1959. xi, 312 p.

Father Joseph Blinzler, professor since 1949 of New Testament Studies in the Philosophico-Theological Academy of Passau in Bavaria, and rector since 1958 of the same institution, sets himself the task of finding a definitive answer to the question: Who was legally responsible for the condemnation and execution of Jesus Christ? The answer at which he arrives, after a most scholarly, and for the reader, satisfyingly thorough sifting of the available evidence, is stated in clear, unequivocal terms: “Anyone who undertakes to assess the trial of Jesus as a historical and legal event . . . must come to the conclusion . . . that the main responsibility rests upon the Jews” (p. 290).

To Catholic readers, that may appear to be belaboring the obvious. But Father Blinzler's conclusion is neither obvious, nor even acceptable to many a non-Catholic reader. Jewish authors especially, as one would expect, contest its correctness. Extremists among them have sought to exculpate the Jews by denying the reliability of the Gospel accounts, labeling them distortions and misrepresentations. The Prague Jew, Karl Katz, for example, claims that “Caiphas loved and revered Jesus”—Jesus was condemned and crucified by Pilate on account of his claim to kingship. Other writers without going quite that far nevertheless maintain that it was the Romans rather than the Jews who were primarily responsible for Christ's death.

One need not read far in this book to realize that the trial of Jesus has been and still is a much discussed problem. Father Blinzler's footnote references are surprisingly numerous, and his bibliography correspondingly lengthy and rich. In recent years, a fresh spate of studies was occasioned by Hitler's persecution of the Jews. After the Dictator's collapse in 1945, more than one Jewish writer, in understandable and anguished resentment at the Nazis' mass murder of German Jews, blamed the Christian Gospel for the blood and violence that swirled around non-Aryan residents of Germany before and during World War II. “It was repeatedly stated on the part of the Jews that

when all was said and done modern anti-semitism was nothing else than the logical result of the Christian thesis that the Jews were guilty of the death of Jesus, . . . that thesis led in a straight line to the gas-chamber of Auschwitz."

To blame the Christian Gospel for Hitler's phrenetic anti-semitism is obviously absurd. The Nazi norm of discrimination was racial rather than religious. The notion of a "superior race" was the brain-child not of the Christian evangelists but of very unchristian philosophers like Nietzsche. Racial discrimination on the basis either of color or of blood is not Christian and cannot be justified by an appeal to the Gospel.

But even if the accusation were true, it would not immediately follow that therefore the Christian thesis is false. It might merely mean that the thesis had been misunderstood, or wrong conclusions of a practical order had been deduced from it. Christians do maintain that the Jews were primarily responsible for Christ's condemnation and death; but the Jews to whom the guilt is imputed are individuals of the past, not their present-day descendants.

At any rate, it was Nazi anti-semitism and the anti-Christian polemic it provoked which provided the proximate occasion for Father Blinzler's study. His book is a work of devotion, although not a devotional work. It makes no appeal to the emotions, and displays none. The investigation proceeds dispassionately and objectively. First, the few brief references to the fate of Christ found in non-biblical sources such as the works of Tacitus, Josephus and the Syrian Mara bar Sarapion are examined and shown to confirm three fundamental facts of the Gospel account: 1) Jesus was sentenced to be crucified by Pontius Pilate (Josephus, Tacitus); 2) Pilate proceeded against Jesus at the instigation of the Jewish authorities (Josephus); 3) The Jews were responsible for our Lord's death (Mara).

Then the detailed accounts in the Gospels, as well as the incidental data furnished by the other books of the New Testament, are studied in order and at length. The discussion is constantly illumined by the author's comprehensive grasp of practically all the literature, ancient and modern, pertinent to his topic. His presentation is clear, conclusive, and even when one disagrees with certain positions he adopts on disputed points of exegesis or historical reconstruction, substantially satisfying.

Among the positions Father Blinzler defends, in the course of proving his principal thesis, the following may be cited as being of special interest. a) B. maintains that Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane was commanded and carried out exclusively by Jews. The "cohort and tribune" mentioned by John (18/3,12) were a detachment of the Temple guard with their leader, not Roman soldiery. b) The arrest itself was strict-

ly legal, and executed in conformity with existing regulations. c) The blasphemy with which Caiphas charges Christ, and for which the Sanhedrin declared Him worthy of death, consisted not in a claim to divinity, but in Christ's public profession of His own messianic dignity. d) Such a claim, considering the circumstances in which it was made, could be considered blasphemous, for it seemed to the Jews to be an arrogant mockery of all the splendid messianic promises made by God to His chosen people. e) B. rejects the more commonly accepted reconstruction of the trial, which distinguishes two sessions of the Sanhedrin, the night and the morning; he maintains there was only one meeting which began around 3:00 A.M. and ended at dawn. f) The Sanhedrin had the power to pass, but not to execute the death sentence. g) The praetorium, where the trial before Pilate took place, is to be identified, not with the fortress Antonia near the Temple, but with Herod's palace in the new section of the city. h) The crown of thorns was removed before our Lord began His "way of the cross". i) Christ carried only the cross-piece; He was nailed to it on Calvary, and then it was hoisted up and affixed to the already standing upright beam of the cross. j) The cause of Christ's death from the medical standpoint is still an open question; frequently discussed, it has never been satisfactorily settled. k) Good Friday is to be dated April 7, 30 A.D. 1) B. accepts John's chronology in preference to that of the Synoptics, namely that the crucifixion took place on the eve of the Passover and not on the feast itself. m) Jaubert's theory that the Last Supper was held on Tuesday rather than Thursday is rejected. "The traditional chronology of the Passion is decidedly more justified."

Many of the preceding points, being peripheral and incidental to the main subject, are discussed in a series of excursions, interspersed at the logical places between the chapters. In the chapters themselves, the main arguments are marshalled in masterful fashion and march on inevitably to the final conclusion, the principal points of which may be summarized as follows:

From a legal standpoint, the main responsibility for Christ's condemnation and death rests upon the Jews. "However . . . it cannot be proved that the Sanhedrin in its proceedings against Jesus was guilty of disregarding the legal forms. Both the arrest of Jesus and the proceedings against Him were completely in accordance with the law that was valid at that time." The Mishna's rules of judicial procedure which the Sanhedrin is accused of transgressing were not formulated till the second century A.D., and were not in force at the time of Christ's trial.

"The only thing that is questionable is whether the death sentence passed by the Sanhedrin was juristically incontestable . . . whether

the Sanhedrists in declaring the messianic self-testimony of Jesus to be blasphemy were giving a judgment in accordance with their convictions and with the criminal law of the time . . . the possibility cannot be excluded that the members of the Sanhedrin were subjectively convinced that Jesus had committed the crime of blasphemy by His assertion. Nevertheless . . . a conscientious and unbiased bench . . . should at least have had some doubts as to whether the actual facts of the case constituted a serious crime."

"It is only in the further course of events that the malicious attitude of the Sanhedrists emerges quite clearly . . . Being aware that they could achieve nothing with the simple charge of blasphemy before the governor's court, they lent the charge a political significance though they must have known that Jesus had never combined any subversive political interests with His messianic ideal. Finally the fact that His enemies were not concerned for the law . . . but were only aiming at the destruction of Jesus is clear from their efforts to hinder Pilate from pronouncing a free and legal judgment by intimidating him with threats and so forcing him to pass sentence of death."

The Jews who incurred the guilt consisted of two groups, the members of the Sanhedrin, and the crowd who demonstrated against Jesus. The crowds were less guilty, though their complicity was not without importance since Christ probably would not have been condemned by Pilate but for them.

Pontius Pilate shares with the Jews responsibility for the death of Jesus, for having had Him scourged and crucified despite his conviction of Christ's innocence. But on the whole his guilt is less than that of the Jews.

Our Lord's death was judicial murder; but it cannot be called deicide "since the enemies of Jesus lacked any deep insight into the mystery of His being."

Our Lord's prayer while He hung dying on the Cross, that His enemies be forgiven, of itself makes clear how unchristian, how anti-Christian it would be on the part of present-day Christians to harbor feelings of dislike and enmity towards the descendants of those who incurred guilt through what happened on the First Good Friday at Golgotha.

The Trial of Jesus can be recommended unreservedly. It is attractively printed and carefully edited. The translation is adequate though it merits no higher commendation than that.

J. J. KAVANAGH

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REGIONALISM VERSUS PROVINCIALISM: A study in problems of Indian National Unity. By Joan V. Bondurant. Institute of